

Companion Field Notes: The Road to Santa Fe

Pueblo Homelands

New Mexico, along with portions of Arizona, is home to the peoples of the Pueblo culture. The [History of the Pueblo Indians](#) traces origins of the Pueblo (which means “village” or “town” in Spanish); the name archeologists have given to the farming people of the American Southwest who built settlements of stone and adobe houses between 1300 and 1600 CE. However, they were previously referred to as the [Anasazi](#), or *ancestors of the enemy*, by the Navaho because a mutual hostility existed with their nomadic neighbors. (See the *Picturing America Teachers Resource Book*, 1-A.1, for [Anasazi ceramics from c. 1100 CE.](#))

A violent history also exists between the descendants of the ancient Pueblo and the colonial Spanish who originally came to New Mexico looking for silver and gold. Not finding these mineral deposits, the Spanish set their sights on fulfilling their mandate to Christianize the American Indians indigenous to this region. The [Pueblo people revolted in 1680](#) and maintained their independence from Spanish authority for 14 years. Although their population and settlements were greatly diminished from disease and conflict in subsequent centuries, descendants of the early Pueblo now number 75,000 and encompass several modern Pueblo tribes including the Hopi, Zuni, Acoma, and Laguna.

According to the [Indian Pueblo Cultural Center](#) in Albuquerque, Pueblo settlements are among the oldest habitations on the North American continent. The Pueblo people are linguistically diverse and this diversity stems from the [distinct language families](#) spoken by the different Pueblo peoples. Moreover, each Pueblo has its own unique traditions, artists, and crafts as well as [ceremonial dances on feast days](#), which the general public may attend. They are renowned around the world for the beauty and artistry of their handcrafts especially their [pottery](#). Open [useful links to learn more about Pueblo](#) and Native American history, culture, contemporary life and the surrounding area. The NEH funded educational resource, [Southwest Crossroads](#), provides additional primary source material including original poems, photographs and inside stories of this Pueblo and Spanish colonial history.

Taos Pueblo (Tau-Tah) "The Place of the Red Willows"

Taos Pueblo, established between 1000 and 1450 CE, holds the distinction of having the largest surviving multistory Pueblo structure in the United States in continual habitation. Its sacred Blue Lake, which was restored to the Pueblo people by the U.S. government in 1970, serves as the reservoir for the Pueblo population's drinking and irrigation needs. The Pueblo played an important role throughout the 400-year history since the Spanish explorers arrived in 1540 in their quest for the golden cities of Cibola, and today it is known for its artistry and handcrafted wares, including [micaceous clay pottery](#) cookware produced with techniques handed down through the ages. See: [Taos Pueblo](#) and National Park Service [Taos Pueblo](#) for further information on this Pueblo.

San Ildefonso Pueblo (Po-Who-Ge-Oweenge) "Where the Water Cuts Through"

San Ildefonso Pueblo, inhabited since at least 1300 CE, is best known because of the signature technique of [black-on-black pottery](#) that originated there and was revived by [María Montoya Martínez and her husband, Julian](#), in the 1930s. See: [San Ildefonso](#) and National Park Service [San Ildefonso](#) for further information on this Pueblo. [Touched by Fire](#) examines the life and legacy of [María Martínez](#). See [Picturing America Teachers Resource Book 1.A-4](#) for further examples of her work.)

El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro ~ *the Royal Road to the Interior*

From the settlement of New Mexico by Spanish colonists in the early 1600s to the coming of the railroad in 1880s the [El Camino Real](#) was a rough and dangerous highway that brought settlers and missionaries with goods and gospel from the Old World via the port of Vera Cruz and the hub of New Spain, Mexico City, to the New World provincial capital of Santa Fe. The story of the road, if told at all, is often relegated to Hispanic ethno-history, but this dynamic entity is also a fundamental chapter in the colonial heritage of the American west.

El Camino Real was a conduit for crops, livestock, and crafts to markets in both capitals. The road runs along the east side of the Rio Grande and follows the crisscrossed network of trails left by the Pueblo people, who originally inhabited this region since at least 800 CE. In 1821, when Mexico declared its independence from Spain, El Camino Real ceased to be “Royal” and thenceforth was known as the Camino Nacional of the Mexican Republic. During the Mexican-American War the road was used by the U.S. Army to invade Mexico.

For travelers along El Camino, two factors determined the route:

- 1) Suitable terrain for wagons and livestock — not too steep or too soft. Steep ground was to be avoided and soft ground was treacherous.
- 2.) Availability of water. Water sources would determine the length of the travelers’ day (*jornada*); the resting places where they would stop over for water and camp the night (*parajes*) became the sites of permanent settlements.

The route was stable over time, but minor variations were common, i.e. seasonal variations in the river caused the road to shift. River crossings (*vados*) were carefully chosen.

El Camino functioned as a means to two ends for the colonial Spanish who navigated it:

- 1) Acquisition of silver: The discovery of mines in New Spain brought the desire to explore new territories to the north and drove many prospectors to follow the trail.
- 2) Expansion of the Catholic religion: Franciscans created missions along El Camino to convert the native people to Christianity and to teach trades and life skills.

Much of El Camino was wiped out and abandoned in 1880, usurped by railroad and later by automobile. Some portions of the road remain intact, especially in the area between Chihuahua and Santa Fe. In New Mexico the route has been the focus of preservation efforts spearheaded by [The El Camino International Heritage Center](#).

(See the National Park Service [El Camino Real Official Map and Guide](#) brochure for an overview.)

Key Points: Locations that played important roles travelling north along El Camino.

Vera Cruz: A starting point and principal port for trading in the Americas for all ships arriving from Spain and the Spanish colonies of the Caribbean.

Mexico City: Capital of New Spain; the hub of economic and cultural life in the New World; and the largest market for goods flowing south from New Mexico. Mining centers ran along the road one after another, reflecting the expansion of the silver mining frontier.

Chihuahua: Strategic site where merchants exercised control over trade to Santa Fe. This two-hundred-mile stretch first blazed by Juan de Onate in 1598 is known as “La Rute de Onate” and follows the Rio Grande riverine valley. In the expedition, Onate conveyed 130 men along with 83 wagonloads of wives and children. Franciscan friars went along to convert the Pueblo people. These settlers found life on the frontier very difficult. It became a silver mining center in the 17th century and a center of economic power in 18th century. Geographically, it is characterized by a harsh unforgiving [stretch of desert](#) consisting of sparse vegetation, few water sources and extreme weather variations.

El Paso del Norte (*Pass of the north*, predecessor of El Paso, Texas) crossing point of the Rio Grande, where Onate’s expedition gave thanks for a successful journey and claimed the Interior Lands (*Tierra Adentro*) for Spain with these words: *In the name of the Christian king, Don Philip, I take and seize tenancy and possession, real and actual, civil and natural, one, two, and three times, and all the times that by right I can and should, without limitations.* -- Juan de Oñate, El Paso, 1598

El Paso served as refuge after the [Pueblo Revolt of 1680](#) where the surviving Spanish colonists retreated to regroup — and years later — to regain control of the territory. It is characterized by two key geographic features: 1) An oasis at the end of the barren stretch of the Chihuahua desert. 2) The site of the most important crossing of the Rio Grande.

Jornada del Muerto (*Deadman’s Journey*) a 80-mile-long desolate wasteland of mesquite terraces east of the Rio Grande, it was one of the most feared sections along El Camino Real. La Jornada was developed for use by cart caravans because the terrain was long and flat making transportation easier than along the Rio Grande.

Las Cruces, one of the little *parajes* (resting places) colonial travelers camped at between [Paraje de Fra Cristobal](#) and Casa Colorado in today’s Socorro County. It grew into a town in the 18th century as a result of the US Army plotting the site in an attempt to bring order to settlers claiming land after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed ending the [US-Mexican War](#).

Socorro (*help, aid*): where the route leaves the desert and enters a higher elevation along the Rio Grandnorthward. First colonized in 1598, it is one of the oldest communities in the United States. Its first inhabitants, Piro people of the Teypana Pueblo, welcomed Oñate and his men on the first expedition. They showed no fear of the strangers, warned the group what lay ahead, and surprised the travelers with a large gift of food to sustain them after their grueling 3-day trek through the desert. Two landmarks: 1) [Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge](#), a unique bird and wildlife sanctuary on old New Mexico Highway 1 along the path of the original route. 2.) [San Miguel Mission](#), constructed in 1891, on the site of the first mission dating back to 1627 that was disassembled in the Revolt of 1680.

San Juan de los Caballeros: first capital of New Mexico established by Juan de Onate’s colonizing party in 1598 at the Tewa village of [Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo](#) north of present-day Espanola. At this point on the trail, the flora of the road returns again to pine forest, last seen in Mexico City. The next winter the colony relocated to a Pueblo, Yungue, which they christened [San Gabriel](#). It remained the capital for the next ten years till it was finally moved south to Santa Fe in 1609.

Santa Fe: terminus of El Camino Real during the colonial period (1610 – 1821) was characterized by dusty roads and adobe houses. A provincial town and distribution point for goods entering New Mexican territory, it served as the cultural and administrative hub of the region. The [Palace of the Governors](#) and site of the [New Mexico History Museum](#), is the oldest public governing structure in United States and encapsulates much of the city’s [17th-century history](#).